[A Veteran Negro Janitor]

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SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A VETERAN NEGRO JANITOR

Date of First Writing December 17, 1938

Name of Person Interviewed Walter K. Hughes

Fictitious name None

Street Address 1428 Taylor Street

Place Columbia, South Carolina

Occupation Janitor

Name of Writer Stiles M. Scruggs

Name of Reviser State Office

“Janitoring doesn't pay a great sight of money. But it is not difficult work, and the pay is sure and regular. That helps keep the wolf away.” Such was the cheerful greeting of Walter H. Hughes, polite Negro janitor at the Arsenal Hill Presbyterian Church.

“Last Sunday, the Rev. Dr. Samuel K. Phillips, my big boss, said in his sermon, 'It is not what we leave when we die, but how did we earn it while we were here, that counts.

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I like that, because it was just what I was thinking.

“I was born on March 3, 1872, in Columbia, and I have lived here all my life. I never was arrested and never was out of a job more than a day or two since I was a little shaver. Lucky? Yep, that's what I call it. I surely am thankful for this, for I have seen many folks suffer for lack of a job all along the rocky road for 66 years.

“The $14 I draw here every Saturday helps to keep my wife and I comfortable. I am very thankful for it and I try to earn it. I've seen many people who didn't have even that sum.

“My daddy was John Hughes and my mammy was Annie (Mitchell) Hughes. They were born in slavery and belonged to white folks by the name they took. Their daddies and mammies were slaves who had been set free under the law after the Civil War. I never heard them talk much about slave days. They didn't live in slavery long enough to learn much about it, and they probably didn't discuss what they knew about it with pleasure.

“Most of the talk I heard between Daddy and Mammy was about work and the conditions that bore down on everybody during reconstruction. They had many white and black friends during my childhood. And they kept busy doing such work as they could find in the years when every one had to do a lot of scratching or suffer.

“They set the work plan for me by their daily life. I learned early that it takes plenty of labor to secure good and clothes. And I have noticed that both white and black people who keep

busy doing something worth while generally live pretty well. The wide road of crime leads to jail sooner or later, and I have seen a considerable number land there. Crime never pays in honest money.

“My mammy was busy washing and ironing clothes for white folks of 3 quality when I became old enough to take notice of affairs about our little home. My daddy was so keen to make a living that he would hire out on the big plantations in the country, if he couldn't get a job in Columbia.

“Daddy was a fine trainer of race horses, and a good judge of horse flesh, too. He was employed for sever years on the big plantation of General Johnson Hagood, in Barnwell county. He trained the horses so well that they often won races at Charleston tracks and at the State Fairs in Columbia.

“Daddy worked for General Hagood from about 1878 until 1890. He could come home sometimes on Sunday to see Mammy and us children, and it was always a happy occasion at our house. It was a happy day for all of us when General Hagood came to Columbia late in 1879 to assume the office of Governor of South Carolina (1880-1992).

“We were pleased because the new governor had chosen Daddy to drive his carriage from Barnwell to Columbia. Daddy met Mammy and me on the State House steps and hugged and kissed us both.

“'The general told me as we was comin' along that I am to work in the State House, but he never has told me yet what I was to do,' Daddy told Mammy. 'You just wait', Mammy told him. 'General Hagood is a man of his word, and he will not forget you.' 'Yes, Mammy, I'm not worried. I just wanted you to know that everything is bright and sunny,' said daddy. The next day after General Hagood became governor, Daddy was appointed head janitor of the State House, and he stayed there as long as General Hagood did.

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“You pleased me so much awhile ago when you spoke of my use of the English language. I think I'd better tell you know I learned to speak as well as I do. I began to attend Edward school when I was six years old, 4 and I studied there for two years. There I learned to spell a little, read a little, and cipher a little. That two years of school was all I had, but I have kept up my study of books, newpapers, and magazines to this day, whenever I get a chance.

“Some of the books and magazines have helped me in the field of janitoring. My reason for quitting school was due to the fact that Daddy died when I was thirteen years old, and I felt it was necessary for me to work and help Mammy make a home for us. My reading aided me. And working for fine white folks further helped me to say what I had to say so it could be easily understood.

“My first earning work was in carrying white folks' clothes, which my mammy had washed and ironed, to their homes. I was not a big boy and I'm not a big man, as you see; and white folks often gave me small coins for making the trip. Now and then other white friends got me to carry a note or a package, and they paid me.

“This errand-running work developed, and I was soon adding more to it by selling newspaper on the streets. I was proud to learn later that the newspaper of Columbia gave me a fine recommendation when they found out that I had applied for a job with F. L. Brown & Brothers, big retail grocers of that day, who needed a boy to drive a delivery wagon. I got that job and held it for three years. Then I quit and went to work for the R. B. McKay firm. The work was similar to my old job, but they paid me more money.

“That firm, in a few years, became the E. T. Hendrix Store, and I delivered goods for the Hendrix firm until it went out of business in 1927. I had begun work at the Brown store at $7.50 a week, and when I transferred to the McKay store it was raised to $10 a week. When 5 Hendrix took the store, they raised me to $12, and every year a dollar was added. In 1927, I was drawing $14 a week.

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“I was not idle long after Mr. Hendrix quit. He had told us, fine man that he was, that his health forced him to stop work, and he gave us notice so we could look out for other jobs before the old ones ended. I talked with some of my white friends, and one of them went with me to see about a job as janitor at the Arsenal Hill Presbyterian Church. During the next day or two I was called as janitor, and I have been here from 1927 to date. I am pleased because I never have been harshly reprimanded for sorry work or conduct in the eleven years I have been here.

“This eleven-year-old job, which I am lucky enough to hold, keeps me reasonably busy. The Arsenal Hill Church is not the largest in Columbia, but it is one of the busiest. There is an average of one meeting a day at the church or at the Sunday School annex. The church and it's annex must be swept and dusted daily. Sometimes there are two or more meetings in twenty-four hours, and I take pride in keeping the premises as spick-and-span as possible all the time.

“The office and study of the Rev. Dr. S. K. Phillips are located in the annex, and I usually attend to these the first thing in the morning, before he arrives. Then I sweep and dust the church pews and floors and return and attend to the remainder of the annex. Thee is plenty of this sort of work over the course of a month.

“In addition, fires must be built in the furnaces of church and annex for five or six months during the fall and winter season. During the summer period, fans and ice must be looked after. So you see, all told, one must keep going here pretty regularly to keep the church plant in apple pie order. This I try to do. From the treatment that I usually 6 experience from the pastor, his secretary, and the membership of the church, I'm inclined to think my services are appreciated here. I'm expecting to get a raise in pay this coming Christmas, if I live. Hints dropped to me indicates such luck.

“I've been married twice. My first wife was Ellen Williams. We met at a church social in 1915, and we courted along for almost four years. Sometimes I thought I was hitting in

high gear in my drive for a wife, but, like as not, at the very next meeting I had to decide the old car wouldn't do anything but shimmy. But I wouldn't take no for an answer, and in 1919 Ellen and I were married. We lived happily until she got sick in 1927, and it kept me scratching hard and regular to pay our expenses during her illness.

“Ellen's folks moved to Ohio shortly after we married. And, when she took sick, they wanted her to come to them at Cincinnati. They wrote us and said that if she were there they believed the medicine, the climate, and special attention might bring back her health. I asked her if she wished to go to them, and she said she would be powerful glad to go. But she smiled at me and added, 'My dear hubby, I sure would hate to leave you behind, and I know we could hardly pay for the expense of a trip for me.'

“I was plain worried. My white and black friends noticed my worriment and asked me if I was sick. By and by I told them what was troubling me. The quiet, silent way in which they came to my aid, with dollars, half dollars, quarter dollars, dimes, and nickels, the next few days, warmed my heart for all humanity. Ellen and I soon left for Cincinnati. There her folks made her as comfortable as we could afford, and I kissed her and came back to my work. Ellen didn't improve in Cincinnati. She made a game fight, but death claimed her in 1930. I last looked on her face there, where we burried her.

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“I came back home sad and weary. I buckled down to work, but it was sure lonesome at the end of the day to go home to nobody. Not long after that I met Mary Young, and we became friends. In the course of time, I convinced her that married life was the happiest of all. So Mary and I were married in 1937. We began our home life in a little house in the rear of 1428 Taylor Street, Columbia. We still live there. Mary is a good housekeeper, and she aids me in making a living, when she gets a chance to work at some of the white folks' houses.

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“Mary also helps to supply our needs in many little ways that I reckon you wouldn't think of. For instance, in the wee home where we live, the yard is small, but she plants sugarcane, peanuts, and potatoes in little corners around the house. She attends these plants like most folks look after flowers, and her thoughtfulness in this respect means that we have some good things to eat on long winter evenings.

JJC